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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001454

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PHALANGE LEADER SAYS MARCH 14 WILL FIGHT
ON

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¶12. (C) Gemayel dismissed the danger of electing a president by absolute majority, arguing the danger of partition existed regardless. He also discounted the opposition's threats of ensuing chaos should March 14 with an absolute majority candidate, claiming Hizballah didn't want a civil war, which would be "suicide" for the Party of God. It is time to rebuild Lebanon's democratic system and sovereignty, he said, and get rid of the consequences of years of hegemony. A weak president would only continue Syrian and Iranian "tutelage" and would be a disaster for Lebanon's future. UNSCR 1559 was a miracle in forcing Syrian troops to leave, but if Syria continues to control the presidency, eventually it will take control of the government and impose a new electoral law that will favor Syrian candidates. Citing an Arabic proverb, Gemayel said that control of Lebanon was an "old dream" for Syria.

TAKING A MOMENT FOR SELF-PROMOTION

¶13. (C) Lebanon needs a strong interlocutor not only on the international level, but also locally, one who is able to dialogue with all of the political groups. A weak president risked falling into Syria's trap. Explaining that he was not advocating a "machine gun-wielding" president, Gemayel

repeated again the need for a strong one. Referring to condolence calls he received following the assassination from a Hizballah MP on behalf of Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah, as well as from opposition leaders Berri and Aoun, Gemayel (obviously suggesting himself) said it was not impossible to have such a candidate, one who can both talk to others and defend Lebanon's sovereignty.

MARCH 14 WILL USE ABSOLUTE MAJORITY IF NECESSARY

¶14. (C) Responding to the Egyptian Ambassador's question as to whether March 14 still had an absolute majority, Gemayel said that at a recent March 14 meeting with Future Movement Saad Hariri and Druse leader Walid Jumblatt, both Mohamed Safadi (widely considered to be one of March 14's less dependable MPs) and Boutros Harb insisted on a two-thirds quorum. His impression from reading the Bishops' statement was that the stronger the majority, the stronger the backing the president would have of the "forces in the field."

¶15. (C) If, however, March 14 is unable to secure the two-thirds, "any kind of election is better than a vacuum," Gemayel said. Insisting that he himself was not advocating the use of an absolute majority, and never mentioned in publicly, Gemayel repeated that a vacuum would be a disaster. It was better to have a minimum of recognition, both at the local and international levels, than a void. People would have to recognize the president one way or another, and this was the best (and fairest) to restart the process of a national dialogue. If the opposition refused to recognize the president, it would be labeled a traitor to democracy.

FELTMAN